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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the emerging practice and issues surrounding consortia of educational institutions, formed in Scotland, in order to widen access to higher education for underrepresented groups, and suggests some key strategies for assuring quality in the interests of students. The paper describes the Scottish Wider Access Programme, its funding, future intentions, the East of Scotland Access Consortium, and inter-consortia contacts. Also, a summary of two studies is presented, concerning collaborative efforts from other fields of activity: the first one addressing the rapid growth of strategic alliances in the U.S. business world over the past 10 years; and the second one examining the experience of multi-agency partnerships in the United Kingdom social services area. Contains 21 references. (GLR)

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M Leech

The Staff College

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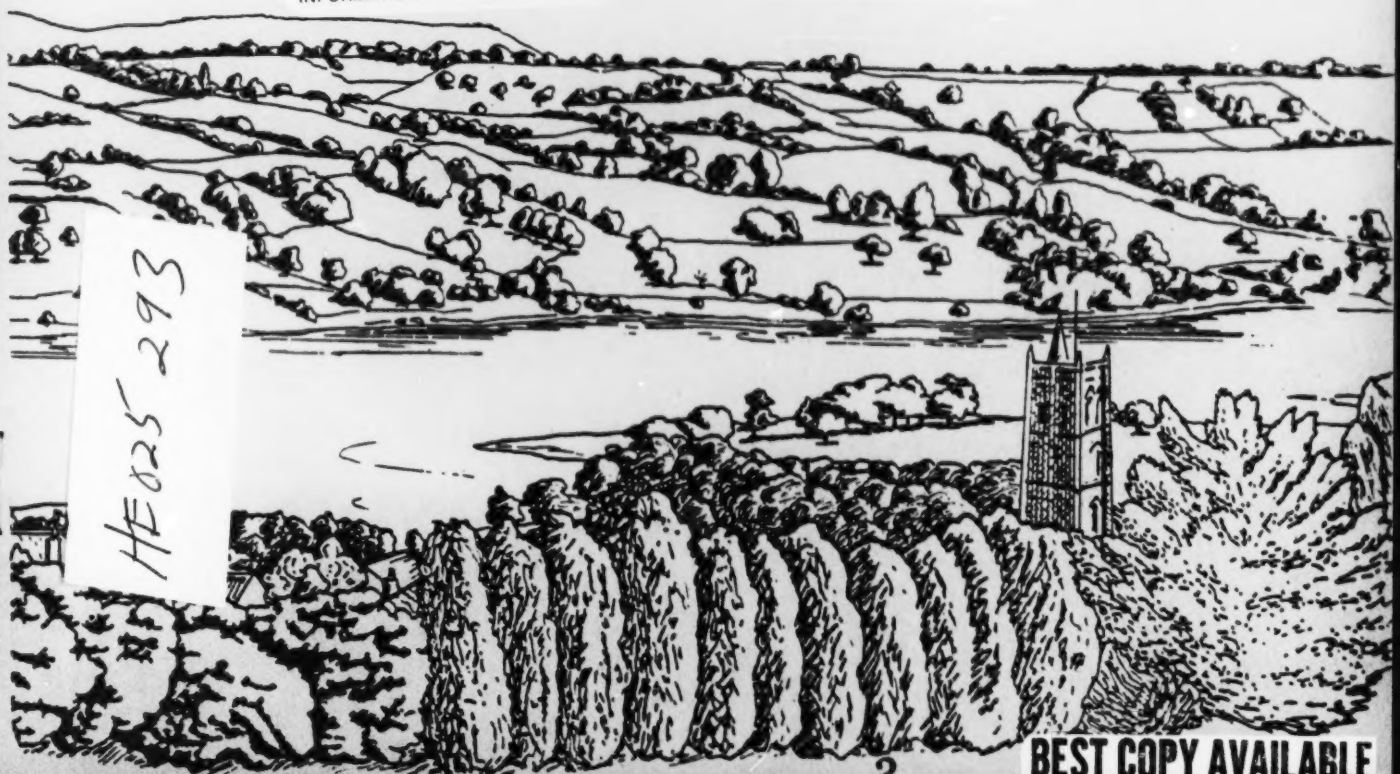

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Mendip Papers

# Making consortia work – The Scottish Wider Access Programme

M Leech

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## Introduction

This paper was first presented at the Annual Conference of the National Association for Developmental Education in Nashville, Tennessee, USA in March 1991. It has been slightly adapted to take account of the publication of the White Papers in May 1991 (DES, 1991).

Consortia of educational institutions have been formed in Scotland to widen access to higher education (HE) for under-represented groups. Such groups include adults aged 21 years and over who left school with few if any formal qualifications, women, disabled people and ethnic minorities. This paper looks at the emerging practice and issues; it goes on to suggest some key strategies for assuring quality in the interests of students.

## Background

As part of the United Kingdom Scotland, with a population of 5 million, is largely governed by the UK Parliament at Westminster. However, certain areas of policy come within the remit of the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Scottish Office in Edinburgh. Education is one such area. The Secretary of State for Scotland has a Minister for Education responsible to him. Executive responsibility lies within The Scottish Office Education Department (SOED) which includes Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). Local responsibility for education rests with the education authorities (EAs) of the 12 regional and island councils, which operate primary and secondary schools, and colleges of further education (FE). The central institutions

and colleges of education are directly funded by the SOED to provide public sector higher education. Responsibility for the eight universities is exercised on a UK basis. There is a single examinations body for vocational education qualifications, the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC).

In England and Wales the main differences are the multiplicity of local education authorities, some very large and some very small, and the variety of vocational education examination bodies. Northern Ireland holds separate powers for education, but again makes use of a variety of vocational education examination bodies.

In the past few years in Britain there has been a growing concern about the need to produce more highly trained people (Finegold and Soskice,1988), and to achieve this by increasing numbers entering higher education. The issue is compounded by demographic change resulting in far fewer younger people in the population. The present Government has re-emphasised its policy that places in higher education should be open for all who can benefit and who wish to do so (DES, 1987).

At the same time it has identified access courses as the third route into higher education for those mainly mature entrants who possess neither traditional school-based nor vocational qualifications. Attention has been drawn to the need to increase participation in higher education and of the importance of establishing links between institutions in order to reach under-represented student groups (Smithers and Robinson, 1989). The need to break new ground in admissions policies and priorities as they affect access has also been stressed (Fulton and Ellwood, 1989). Fostering the aspiration for a college education in order to build a learning society has become a key requirement for Britain to prepare for the next century (Sir Christopher Ball, 1990). The tradition of high entrance requirements to UK higher education makes the notion of accessibility a novel one in some institutions, and it will be interesting to see if, and how soon, the third route acquires parity with the traditional routes.

### *The White Papers*

In May 1991 the Government published a White Paper from the Scottish Office **Access and opportunity - a strategy for education and training** (Cm 1530) which proposes to switch the responsibility for Scottish FE colleges to the SOED. In it, specific reference is made to the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) (Para 5.4) and its aim of guaranteeing a place on a higher education course for students who successfully complete a recognised access course. Continued support is declared for the projected expansion of higher education, and a commitment to fund colleges of FE to provide access courses to higher education is also given (Para 7.24). The Government also published at the same time another White Paper **Higher education - a new framework** (Cm 1541) in which proposals are made to set up a new funding council for higher education in Scotland (DES, 1991).

## The Scottish Wider Access Programme

The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) was launched by the Secretary of State for Scotland in April 1988. He announced funding to establish an infrastructure of consortia for the development of a national framework of courses, admissions and other access arrangements to broaden participation in higher education. The declared aims of SWAP are:

- to promote wider access to vocationally relevant higher education; and

- to arrange collaboration between higher education institutions, further education colleges and education authorities in identifying and supporting people with non-standard entrance qualifications for higher education in preparation for, and after they have been admitted to, higher education courses.

The Government sees SWAP as one initiative to offset the effect of demographic change in Scotland which will see the number of 17 year olds drop by 30 per cent in the period 1988-1994. Above all the initiative is an attempt to respond to the unfulfilled potential for further personal development amongst adults. The initial effort has gone into the provision of access courses leading to a guaranteed place in a higher education institution for those students who satisfactorily complete the course (Jordinson, 1990).

## *Funding the programme*

£1m was made available by Government for SWAP for the period 1988 to March 1991. Four consortia were approved following an invitation to bid. Each consortium was required to indicate the level of support being provided in cash and kind from each of its constituent EAs and institutions, to complement central funding. This additional support has nearly doubled the resources targeted to SWAP.

## *Future intentions*

It has recently been decided to extend SWAP for a further three year period to March 1994. However, the amount of funding available is being reduced, and the number of consortia reduced from four to three through a process of amalgamation, though still retaining country-wide coverage for SWAP.

## *The East of Scotland Access Consortium*

This consortium's partners are made up of four large EAs, 13 agricultural and FE colleges, four universities and nine other higher education institutions.

The formal structure comprises the following:

- Steering Group,
- Finance and General Purposes Committee,
- Curriculum Group.

The Steering Group is the body which determines the general policy direction of the consortium; it approves the development plan, sets objectives and priorities, and monitors progress. Its membership comprises representatives of top management of the constituent partners, together with colleagues from SCOTVEC and HMI.

The Finance and General Purposes Committee meets as a sub-committee to deal with more detailed financial, staffing and executive matters. It meets between Steering Group meetings and is able to progress policy matters and generally keep the consortium operating in a proactive and responsive style.

The Curriculum Group includes representative course leaders and middle managers, who meet to implement policy and give advice in terms of access course needs analysis, design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation. It also fulfils a quality assurance role in the consortium by establishing criteria and principles to work towards in the support of access provision.

The consortium operates with a team of staff drawn from the different backgrounds of partner organisations, indeed most of these access workers are seconded from the consortium partners. The team leader meets regularly with the consortium chair for policy steerage, guidance, support and progress reporting.

The team of access workers has developed a portfolio of roles and skills (Leech, 1991), including that of 'boundary spanner' (Parkes, 1988), as it establishes effective links at the interface between different types of institution. Each access worker also establishes other groups drawn from partner organisations for purposes such as course planning, sharing learning materials, marketing, guidance and counselling techniques, staff training, and residential courses for students.

Of equal importance in terms of effect are the many informal actions taken by individual access workers in furthering the objectives of the consortium. This is particularly true of their networking activities, not only through contact from the centre but through remote networking facilitating individuals in partner institutions to make direct contact, through the influencing of policy-makers at different levels, seeking out change agents, and reaching potential students through shopping centres, community networks and local radio.

## *Inter-consortia contacts*

Formal and informal contacts take place on an inter-consortia basis in order to exchange information, organise national development events, devise new curricula, train staff and provide mutual support. These contacts have become increasingly important as some students have sought access to institutions beyond their locality. Such contacts will help build a national infrastructure of access arrangements as a credit accumulation and transfer scheme becomes established (CNAA, 1990). National level steerage is also achieved through meetings of consortia chairpersons, access team leaders and the Scottish Office Education Department, whose HMI contributes to the quality assurance process on a national basis. SCOTVEC also takes part in this process through its work on

SWAP committees, its curriculum design, its programme validation and its verification of programme delivery.

### Consortium sensitivities

The East of Scotland Access Consortium can look upon its achievements to date with reasonable satisfaction as judged by the number of access courses it has established, the increasing numbers of students entering higher education and the relatively low drop-out rates. Its access workers are successfully reaching under-represented groups, and are influencing colleges to establish more flexible provision. It is satisfying to observe the growing understanding of, and mutual respect for, the different cultures of the institutions involved. It is also rewarding to note the extent to which partner organisations have continued to support formal meetings at different levels, and provide much support less formally, and between meetings.

Inevitably though there are sensitivities which can strain working relationships when so many organisations are brought together on a collaborative basis of this type. Some of the issues include:

- devoting sufficient time to make the consortium work effectively;
- developing a sense of ownership to what is a 'top-down' initiative;
- maintaining commitment over several years;
- achieving parity of esteem between partners, given the perceived institutional hierarchy and resource imbalances;
- achieving parity and co-operation among small/large, rural/urban partners, especially given competition for students;
- establishing a common language, given the variety of organisation types;
- recognising the different starting points of partners;
- acknowledging different allocation of roles in different institutions;
- managing the tension between expectations at national level, goals and targets set at consortium level, and achievements at course level, given the current requirements of national level monitoring;
- establishing quality assurance for access, given existing and varied quality assurance systems;
- interfacing access developments with equal opportunities policies.

What has been essential is to sensitise access workers in the consortium to these issues at different levels within each partner organisation and at different levels between partners. It has been heartening to see the extent to which partner organisations have been prepared to work patiently for progress, knowing that changes can take time.

## Two studies of collaboration between consortia

The operation of consortia alliances and partnerships is a relatively new development in UK education, especially in Scotland. This section of the paper summarises two studies of collaboration from other fields of activity. The first draws upon the rapid growth of strategic alliances in the US business world over the past 10 years which has been studied by Kanter (1989). The second makes use of the extensive experience of multi-agency partnerships in the UK social services area which have been studied by Fletcher-Campbell (1991).

Kanter (in **Becoming PALS: pooling, allying, and linking across companies**) analyses the effects upon partner organisations where many US companies have established new co-operative agreements with other companies both at home and abroad which involve unprecedented levels of sharing and commitment. She has developed a classification of types of alliance. She points to the fragility of many such partnerships - some 70 per cent of which have disbanded although, of course, some were planned to do so. She stresses that the management complexities can be considerable. She has looked at the major issue of power imbalance, and at the implications for managers of having to 'juggle constituencies rather than control subordinates'. She has developed a model for making alliances work over the long-term.

Fletcher-Campbell's work is based upon a study of partnerships established in UK local government to deal with children in care. She found that many

partnerships relied too heavily upon individual initiative and goodwill, a dearth of structures and a lack of common language. She focuses upon the problems which occur when the need to communicate through different levels of partnerships is neglected; this is compounded when teachers' and social workers' stereotyped perceptions of each other are not tackled. She has drawn up a set of general management criteria which she suggests could be more widely applicable to help partnerships flourish.

## Making consortia work

This part of the paper draws extensively from the two studies mentioned above, and from the limited experience to date in the East of Scotland Access Consortium, to propose a preliminary set of necessities for helping to make access consortia work over the longer term.

Adapted from Kanter:

- regard the consortium relationship as important; give it senior management attention and time to create the conditions for long-lasting, mutual benefits;
- source investment of resources for the longer term, to help equalise benefits over time;
- establish the interdependency of partners, to help keep power balanced;
- achieve integration of consortium operations; build links at different levels, both within each partner organisation and between partners;
- keep information flowing between partners about each other's access plans and directions;
- institutionalise the consortium sufficiently to provide form and structures in order to build trust.

Adapted from Fletcher-Campbell:

- establish clear aims for the consortium;
- clarify the nature of the partnership - composed of equals with different expertise;
- establish clear and coherent roles and responsibilities of the access workers involved, and of office-bearers in the consortium;
- strive to achieve a common language.

Some additional points:

- plan staff development for the consortium access workers;
- invest in face-to-face contact to help build shared values;
- consult on small as well as large issues to enhance ownership;
- renew aims and partner commitments from time to time.

One of the key challenges will be establishing the aims of the consortium, because this will involve a debate about the aims of access, definitions of access, and issues of boundary management (Parry, 1989). For example, should higher education teachers adapt their teaching and learning strategies to take account of access students joining their courses or should the students conform to pre-existing strategies? Kanter recognises the importance of the development of consortium policies over time:

> Partnerships are dynamic entities ..... because of the complexity of interests forming them. A partnership evolves; its parameters are never completely clear at first, nor do partners want to commit fully until trust has been established. And trust takes time to develop. It is only as events unfold that partners become aware of all the ramifications and implications of their involvement. (Kanter, 1989)

In an evaluative study of an education and training partnership formed to support urban redevelopment in London's Docklands, Saunders also underlines the importance of managing ambiguities of role and function, and of introducing the notion of process into a partnership's policy making (Saunders, 1989).

Educational institutions are becoming more aware of their environments and of the need to manage their boundaries (Hoy and Miskel, 1989), but Kanter indicates that such strategic partnerships can change

how the individual organisations operate and how their managers manage.

It is possible that the above set of necessities could contribute to quality assurance criteria becoming established for access arrangements (CNAA/CVCP, 1989, and Parry and Davies, 1991), and could inform the building of performance indicators. In particular, these necessities have significant implications for the job definition, selection, management and staff development of consortium access workers.

## Conclusions

Access consortia are first and foremost a means to an end - they are working towards the evolution of accessible institutions (Duke, 1989) in which access students will achieve successful learning outcomes. Some consortia in the UK are judged to be working successfully (DES, 1990), but new pressures, for example, for quality assurance (CNAA, 1989), will call for flexible management attitudes between partners, and allowing form to be determined by goals. Effective partnership is ever more important today in the interests of under-represented groups of students. As Fletcher-Campbell urges:

> There is, perhaps, a moral imperative that lip service' to partnership be transformed to a life-enhancing 'silver service'. (Fletcher-Campbell, 1991)

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